

# Spotlight

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Children constructing a society of their own in the absence of adults (explained or not) is a familiar trope in children's literature. In notable cases it goes very badly (see: *Lord of the Flies*) while in others they design an enviably cozy domestic life (see: *Boxcar Children*) but it always used as a way to consider the human condition. Are we born with the capacity to hurt one another or with deep inborn reserves of empathy? Almost always, the books conclude that it is both but which wins the battle and becomes our defining trait varies widely and to mixed results. In Laurel Snyder's first foray into children's literature (she is an acclaimed poet) she tackles this familiar story with grace. Her novel, *Orphan Island*, takes on the foggy chapter often known as "coming of age" from the setting of an isolated island seemingly built to support a small band of children (nine in total) each one age apart who arrive and depart via a mysterious green boat that shows up annually to collect the oldest and leave a new youngest.



In the idyllic setting of *Orphan Island* we meet Jinny who has just become the Eldest and is tasked with introducing and transitioning the newest orphan, the spritely but sensitive Ess. The novel does a good job describing the island laying out the inner workings of each child's role and relationship to the group and their home. In design it is very similar to other books in the "abandoned kid society" genre but unique enough to remain interesting – replete with magical descriptions of winds that catch falling children and the special fruits and vegetables harvested on the island. Where the novel becomes spectacular though is when Jinny decides not to depart on her incoming green boat and shakes the island and the group to its core. Here Jinny confronts the realities of growing up and it is easy to be sympathetic to the journey she goes on. This journey is all the more entrancing because her struggles and conflicts begin to play out in the landscape of the island itself which promptly starts going sideways the minute she disobeys the age old tradition of departing once you become the oldest. *Orphan Island* is a wise and charming book that will appeal to children and adults alike.

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